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MILTON'S SONNETS

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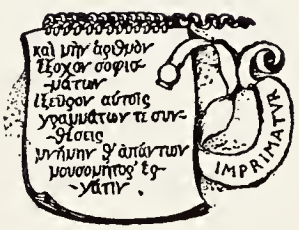
ALDEN SAMPSON



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MILTON'S SONNETS.

A Paper read before the Association of the Haverford Alumni, in Alumni Hall, Haverford College, Pennsylvania, on the evening of the twenty-first of June, 1886, by Alden Sampson, A. M. *(Haverford and Harvard).*

For twenty years of Milton's life, embracing the period, namely, of his middle life, from the year in which he wrote *Lycidas*, 1637, until the year in which we know he was continuously at work upon *Paradise Lost*, 1658, he wrote no original English verse, except in the form of sonnets.

During this time he also wrote half a dozen Italian sonnets. Both of these groups I shall briefly consider, as well as the circumstances under which some of them were written, so far as it is necessary for a correct understanding of them, and perhaps may dwell somewhat upon the merits and limitations of the form in which he wrote. In what I say of the Sonnet in general, I shall invoke the aid of the poets themselves who have written such verse.

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I have heard it urged against the Sonnet that it does not answer Herbert Spencer's axiomatic test of excellence in form,—the requirement of performance with least necessary expenditure of power in expression. To that objection there is sufficient answer.

On the one hand, as Wordsworth says in writing of the Sonnet,

> The prison unto which we doom
> Ourselves, no prison is.
>
> Nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room,
> And hermits are contented with their cells,
> And students with their pensive citadels;
> Maids at the wheel, the weaver at his loom,
> Sit blithe and happy; bees that soar for bloom
> High as the highest peak of Furness Fells
> Will murmur by the hour in foxglove bells:
> In truth, the prison, unto which we doom
> Ourselves, no prison is; and hence to me,
> In sundry moods, 'twas pastime to be bound
> Within the Sonnet's scanty plot of ground;
> Pleased if some souls (for such there needs must be)
> Who have felt the weight of too much liberty
> Should find brief solace there, as I have found.

When once a poet has mastered the sonnet form, a definite mould into which to shape his thought is an aid rather than a hindrance. Instead of having a little left over, when he has reached his limit of fourteen lines, or running a trifle short, as some seem to imagine he might do, he instinctively knows with perfect sureness, before a line has definitely shaped itself in his

mind, whether or not the subject is suited to his purpose. A master of the Sonnet has called it

> The feeling from the bosom thrown
> In perfect shape.
>
> (WORDSWORTH, Dedication to *Sonnets.*)

On the other hand, the sonnet form is an immense advantage to the reader, who is surely to be considered in the matter, for there cannot be poems without readers any more than an eagle could exist without doves and white, innocent rabbits to feed upon. Readers are the natural and legitimate prey of poets, and, in relation to the poets, answer the purpose of their creation just so far as they appreciatively read what the former have written; the old-fashioned idea that it was the other way about, and that there were poets for the delectation of readers, is all a mistake. Poets that are worthy of the name write because it is their passion to do so, and because they cannot help themselves, and not primarily for the sake of being read,—they would write whether they were read or not;—but in order for the poem to be preserved, and for the author to feel the reflex inspiration to be derived from appreciation and sympathy, there must be at least one reader besides the poet himself; he is a sort of necessary evil, often making ill return, however, for what he receives, being over-exacting and carping. Therefore, although the poet is bound not to consider the reader in the choice and treatment of his subject, but is to be a law unto himself therein, yet it behooves him to conciliate his reader in the matter of form, and so

far as he is able, to smooth the way for him in this regard.

It is here that we see the *positive* advantages of the Sonnet. In the first place, the absence of obscurity, which is a rigid canon of this class of verse, and the length confined to fourteen lines, ensure, so far as anything the poet does can ensure, the sustained attention of the reader to the end. And, in the second place, the identity of form, after it is once mastered by the reader, frees him from the disadvantages of irregularity and surprise, so that he is enabled to give his undivided attention to the meaning of the sonnet, and to whatever beauty of expression it may contain. If any one doubt this, let him take up Wordsworth's *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*, where in each successive stanza, for the sonnets here form a succession of stanzas, is rendered a sharply drawn picture from English history, presented in an atmosphere of reflection almost demanded by the nature of the sestet,—with the requirements of which no one was more familiar than Wordsworth,—and without the forty, or hundred and forty, discursive and tediously didactic lines, which would inevitably intervene, or come in this proportion to the fourteen lines of a sonnet, if this were the *Excursion*.

One of the most exquisite little beasts that I ever saw was a crab, which I dug out of a sand bank during a desultory stroll along the beach at Old Point Comfort, Virginia. A little entrance in the side of the bank and a vanishing hole bespoke an inhabitant, and tempted exploration. With as much care lest I should lose its course, in the clear, cool, characterless sand, as if I were reading the *Excursion* and feared to lose its

thread of interest, I persevered inward and downward, until at last, instinct with life, of a pale gray, not unlike the sand itself, save that the sun revealed on its moist back the iridescent tints of the opal, the occupant of the mysterious burrow stood revealed. You cannot expect me in words of description to convey the pleasure which a creature so perfect and so dainty would awaken.

Now the difference between Wordsworth's Sonnets and much of his other verse, in the fifty or sixty thousand lines which he wrote, is that, in the *Prelude* or in the *Excursion* for instance, you have to dig for your crabs, while the first glance at the Sonnets reveals their charm, and commands your admiration.

I shall not enter into any general discussion of the merits of this style of composition, or spend much time in definition. Everybody knows a sonnet when he sees it, and perhaps it is sufficient that they who write sonnets should understand the grammar of construction to which they must conform.

Those rules are fixed and arbitrary. Perhaps it will be sufficient for our purpose to say that two quatrains and two tercets have been found to be the form which most effectively presents the matter of the Sonnet. At the most, six rhymes are allowed, three in the octave and three in the sestet, although the requirements of the more strict and elegant manner would limit the number to four or five, allowing only two in the octave, and three or two rhymes in the sestet, either variety being perhaps equally good.

The rule of arrangement of rhymes according to the Italian or 'Guittonian' form in the octave allows of no

deviation; the form of the sestet is less arbitrary, its function allows of quicker and freer action, and of greater variety of rhyme. Wordsworth, who most carefully studied the possibilities of the Sonnet, allowed himself great latitude in the sestet; I had the curiosity to count the variations of arrangement of rhyme in the sestet in sixty of his sonnets chosen from a selection made without regard to this feature, the sixty namely in Matthew Arnold's abridgment of Wordsworth's Poems, and found in that number sixteen varieties of arrangement employed.

In regard to the substance of the Sonnet there can be no deviation from the rule which requires that it shall express but a single thought or feeling—

> A Sonnet is a moment's monument,
> Memorial from the Soul's eternity
> To one dead, deathless hour. Look that it be,
> Whether for lustral rite or dire portent,
> Of its own intricate fullness reverent;
> Carve it in ivory or in ebony,
> As Day or Night prevail; and let Time see
> Its flowering crest impearled and orient.
>
> A Sonnet is a coin: its face reveals
> The Soul,—its converse, to what Power 'tis due:—
> Whether, for tribute to the august appeals
> Of Life, or dower in Love's high retinue,
> It serve; or 'mid the dark wharf's cavernous breath,
> In Charon's palm it pay the toll to death.
>
> (ROSSETTI.)

The typical sonnet states and develops its subject in the first and second quatrains; this being the end of

the octave, there should occur a slight pause before entering upon the sestet, which should approach the thought upon another and higher level, and in the typically perfect sonnet does so. Shakspere, although quite ignoring the correct form, as a rule instinctively observes the pause after the octave, and advances the thought to a higher stage in the sestet. The progress of the octave and sestet has been likened to the motion in rise and descent of a ball; the momentary pause at the turn of the ball, where it seems to stop to think about going home again, is that at the end of the octave. The simile just fails of being a perfect one, but if I may be permitted to indulge in epigram, a sonnet written on this plan falls into the vice of epigram itself,—the action comes to the end with a crash, instead of quietly lapsing, as it ought to do, its purpose fulfilled.

Nothing better will be written about this phase of the Sonnet than the following, the sestet of one by Theodore Watts:

> A sonnet is a wave of melody:
> From heaving waters of the impassioned soul
> A billow of tidal music one and whole
> Flows in the 'octave'; then returning free,
> Its ebbing surges in the 'sestet' roll
> Back to the depths of Life's tumultuous sea.

To compare small things with great, and if I may be permitted to say so without irreverence, which I think can hardly be detected, the sestet should bear the same relation to the octave that the New Testament does to

the Old; it should be the fulfilment and consummation of the former's hopes and promise. The purpose of the former is to prepare our minds for the reflection, inspiration, lesson, or revelation held in the latter.

With such possibilities, it is not surprising that, in a field which has been so assiduously worked as this has been, many of the choicest gems of English poesy should be found.

> Scorn not the Sonnet; Critic, you have frowned
> Mindless of its just honours: with this key
> Shakspere unlocked his heart; the melody
> Of this small lute gave ease to Petrarch's wound;
> A thousand times this pipe did Tasso sound;
> With it Camoëns soothed an exile's grief;
> The Sonnet glittered a gay myrtle leaf
> Amid the cypress with which Dante crowned
> His visionary brow; a glow-worm lamp
> It cheered mild Spenser, called from Faery-land
> To struggle through dark ways; and when a damp
> Fell round the path of Milton, in his hand
> The Thing became a trumpet, whence he blew
> Soul-animating strains — alas! too few.
>
> (WORDSWORTH.)

The necessity for terse utterance, combined with the other requirements which I have mentioned, makes it perfectly adapted for the expression of love, in whose service it was devised, and will always be employed; for eulogy; for philosophic reflection, if the philosophy be clothed in the garb of imaginative language; for the expression of delight of any sort; for any strong emotion, — provided always that a sonnet contain not more than a single thought or emotion, — that it do

not offend the unities. It may hold within itself intricacies to baffle a single perusal. Shakspere's sonnets contain subtleties to baffle repeated and careful study, and yet there can be no doubt but that he employed this medium of expression with a perfectly clear appreciation of its mysterious capabilities.

The art of sonnet-making is a mystery — just as much a mystery as coat-making was in the Middle Ages. Those who know in what lies the secret of success, of course have been more discreet than to reveal it, or have couched their revelation in properly mysterious words. In answer to the riddle which he himself propounds, 'What is a sonnet?' a writer still living* expresses himself in metaphors, using the form of whose essence he interrogates.

'Tis the pearly shell
That murmurs of the far-off murmuring sea.

* * * * *

This was the flame that shook with Dante's breath;
The solemn organ whereon Milton played,
And the clear glass where Shakspere's shadow falls;
A sea this is — beware who ventureth!
For like a fjord the narrow floor is laid
Deep as mid ocean to the sheer mountain walls.

I think it is Gosse who speaks of this as an 'age of flourishing sonneteers.' It would do for him to speak in mild disparagement, for he has written some very good sonnets himself. But it is well for us not to overlook the fact that in no one department of verse does this century excel more fully than in the Sonnet, and only one other period, the Elizabethan, at all compares

* Richard Watson Gilder.

with it in productiveness. In form the Sonnet was then crude, and in substance was limited to a narrow realm. To-day it is the fashion, and has countless admirers. Every poet of the century has added to the number of those already written, and new ones challenge our admiration constantly; in fact a number of the *Academy* now without a fairly good one is the exception.

Mr. Waddington quotes a writer in the *Westminster Review*, whom he endorses, calling attention to the resemblance, 'making allowance for altered circumstances,' between the English Sonnet and the Greek Epigram, and saying that the Sonnet is taking the place with us which the Epigram held in the literature of the Greeks. In both 'style is put under high pressure,' (Lytton); 'Of both it may be said, in the words of an old author, that although a little thing gives pleasure, perfection is not a little thing.' (Saml. Waddington.)

The Sonnet is almost a touchstone for profound emotion. The spurious in this garb is revealed at once. If the clown would escape detection let him not don the habit of the prince. Intense feeling here can allow itself a voice, guarded by dignity of expression from the betrayal of weakness, or from falling into lack of self-control. Even the most intense feeling can hardly become hysterical in fourteen lines.

Allow me to recall to your mind, as examples of unquestioned realness and intensity of feeling, many of Rossetti's sonnets in the *House of Life*, Keats's *Last Sonnet*, or that beginning

The day is gone, and all its sweets are gone:

Lowell's Sonnet on the death of his wife, or Wordsworth's in memory of his daughter—

> Surprised by joy—impatient as the Wind
> I turned to share the transport—oh! with whom
> But Thee, deep-buried in the silent tomb,
> That spot which no vicissitude can find?

or that one beginning

> It is a beauteous Evening, calm and free;
> The holy time is quiet as a Nun
> Breathless with adoration:

that beginning

> Another year!—another deadly blow!
> Another mighty Empire overthrown!

or that other,

> Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour:
> England hath need of thee.

The present age regards the capabilities of this form of verse in an altogether different light from that in which its predecessors regarded them. The faults which Addison points out for avoidance in the Epic or Heroic Poem would be regarded to-day, strange as it would formerly have seemed, as equally applicable to the Sonnet. There are, Addison tells us, 'Two kinds of thoughts which are carefully to be avoided. The

first are such as are affected and unnatural; the second such as are mean and vulgar.' Until Milton's time, affectation and artificiality were the very life's breath of the Sonnet; a life in death we deem it now. The sonnets of Spenser and of Shakspere were artificial.

Every one must have noticed in examples of Egyptian sculpture, the smile which the faces invariably bear, and which I suppose was regarded by cultivated Egyptians of those days as absolutely required by good breeding. To preserve a composure of feature best described as Grecian, would no doubt, to a man of the world, of the Egyptian court at its prime, have seemed rude and barbaric in the extreme. In like manner, before Milton's day, to have written a sonnet in a perfectly straightforward, simple way, would have proclaimed the writer's ignorance of polite usage.

I remember an honoured professor of Law, who would condemn the lack of artificial construction in a Bill or Answer in Equity, and I recall the tone of approbation with which he would commend the excellence of some special pleading as being 'artificially drawn.' It was a quality of the English Sonnet before Milton, that it was 'artificially drawn'; he overcame that tradition, and it is the merit of his sonnets that they are the natural, forcible utterance, recorded at the time, of emotions actually felt, and not merely imagined by the poet for the sake of expression in language which he has at his command; the exercise of an instinctive faculty whose cultivation and indulgence are merely a source of refined pleasure.

Milton's Sonnets, twenty-four in number, three hundred and forty-two lines, are almost half as long as a

majority of the books of *Paradise Lost*, nearly twice as long as *Lycidas*, almost exactly twice the length of *Il Penseroso*, and more than double that of *L'Allegro*.

Of course the value of a poem does not depend upon its length, nor can its importance be thereby gauged, but it is interesting at least to see what part of a poet's work any particular group of poems may form: and when we learn that the *Sonnets* are equal in length to *Lycidas* and *L'Allegro* together, we cannot at all events dismiss them as an insignificant portion of Milton's work. The additional fact that their composition was spread over nearly thirty years of the poet's life, adds a peculiar sort of personal charm to them, and one that is not associated with any other of his works. Here we have verses written when he was a Cambridge Bachelor of Arts, working for his Master's degree; love sonnets in Italian, written when he was in the full tide of scholarly popularity abroad,—young, handsome, learned, already recognized in Italy as a poet of distinction,—and full of ambition for the future; sonnets addressed to Cromwell, Fairfax, Vane; sonnets inspired by the stirring events of the times in which he lived, as that upon the intended assault of the royal army on London, and upon the occasion of the massacre of the Vaudois in the Alps; sonnets inspired by friendship; a touching sonnet on the occasion of his blindness; and, finally, one on the death of his dearly beloved wife when he was fifty years of age. The *Sonnets* at that time of his life formed more than an eighth part of his entire poetical work, except what he wrote in Latin and in Greek, and throwing out of account his metrical version of the Psalms, which possesses this qual-

ity in common with the vast majority of church hymns and psalmody, that it is to be valued for something quite different from poetry; in fact is not poetry at all.

As we have often heard, had Milton died at the age of Spenser, Burns, Byron, Shelley, Keats, or Clough, we should have had no *Paradise Lost* at all, nay even had he died at the age of Shakspere, we should have had only a few fragments of that poem. Had he died before it was written, upon the *Ode on the Nativity*, upon *Comus*, *L'Allegro*, *Il Penseroso*, *Lycidas*, and some half a dozen of the Sonnets, his renown as a writer of English verse of the first order would be established; having, however, written *Paradise Lost*, everything of his past production at once starts forward into new prominence, for a reason apart from its own excellence, as being the work of England's one epic poet, and as an assistance to understand the man — for that if for no other reason of great value. It is necessary for us to recall these facts to estimate properly the subject in hand, — how far the Sonnets of Milton reflect his character and the times in which they were written, and how important they are as poetry.

The reason 'why Milton could not write a sonnet,' said Dr. Johnson, sitting in solemn confab with a kindred genius, Hannah More, was, that being possessed of a 'genius that could hew a colossus out of a rock, he could not carve heads on cherry-stones,' — managing, in these few words, in the first place, to express his contempt for the Sonnet, unmindful of its due honours, and forgetting what Petrarch, Dante, and Shakspere had written in this form, and in the second place, to demonstrate his own dullness as a critic, for as a

matter of fact, among Milton's Sonnets are to be found those same colossal qualities, the existence of which in *Paradise Lost* he could not altogether ignore.

I once saw a countryman try to stop a runaway horse. Failing in his purpose, and resolved to be a force if not an assistant power, he hit the horse a smart blow with his shovel as it escaped from him. Johnson's criticism was as useful. He was making it more difficult instead of easier for the less erudite public to master the very points of excellence which it was his business to find and capture for their service.

I have said that Dr. Johnson could not altogether ignore the excellence of *Paradise Lost*, yet as a matter of fact, he was unable to express admiration for that poem without very serious qualifications. It is 'one of the books,' he says, 'which the reader admires and lays down, and forgets to take up again. None ever wished it longer than it is. Its perusal is a duty rather than a pleasure.' A criticism worthy of the literary editor of the *Cheyenne Boomerang*, and as dangerous to its projector as the boomerang.

But it is in his estimate of *Lycidas* that Johnson most fully succeeds in showing the worthlessness of his strictures generally upon Milton; of *Lycidas*, since selected, Hallam, for instance, says in his *Literature of Europe*, by the suffrage of scholars and lovers of literature, as the poem *par excellence* in our language which may serve as a test in a reader of genuine feeling for what is really good in poetry,—the one poem best suited to prove an appreciation of those higher qualities of poetry that must be felt to be realized, and which lie beyond the province of demonstration altogether.

'In this poem,' says Johnson, 'there is no nature, for there is no truth; there is no art, for there is nothing new. Its form is that of a pastoral; easy, vulgar, and therefore disgusting; whatever images it can supply are long ago exhausted; and its inherent improbability always forces dissatisfaction on the mind.' Elsewhere he said: 'Surely no man could have fancied that he read *Lycidas* with pleasure, had he not known the author!'

Bearing in our recollection his estimate of *Paradise Lost* and of *Lycidas*, we shall not be surprised at what he says of the *Sonnets*. 'They deserve not any particular criticism'; he informs us, 'for of the best it can only be said that they are not bad; and perhaps only the eighth and twenty-first are truly entitled to this slender commendation.' He says elsewhere, 'Milton never learned the art of doing little things with grace; he overlooked the milder excellence of suavity and softness; he was a *Lion* that had no skill in dandling the *Kid*,'—again striking wildly with the shovel of his wit. Johnson's ponderous attempt to gambol, here, puts one in mind of the continuation of the passage from which he adapts, and its equally agile antics; where for the amusement of our first parents in their honeymoon

> Th' unwieldy Elephant
> To make them mirth used all his might, and wreathed
> His lithe proboscis.
>
> (P. L., IV., 345-7.)

We cannot forgive Johnson for his belittling criticism of Milton, for it was evoked by ignoble motives. Johnson was a devout Royalist and churchman, Milton a

Republican and too extreme a Dissenter to find favour long even among the Presbyterians; Johnson hated him on these grounds, and abused his autocratic power in literature to throw him into disfavour.

Addison, by careful and discriminating praise, had recalled people's flagging attention to the beauty and supreme excellence of *Paradise Lost;* Johnson undid that work by unfair and unjust use of his power, (for he and literature at that time were nearly synonymous,) and brought him into disfavour again for half a century. But there is no question now about the place he holds, or about the merit of his Sonnets,—

> Soul-animating strains, alas! too few,

Wordsworth calls them; the late Archbishop Trench describes them as the 'noblest in the English language'; Palgrave says, 'Milton's (Sonnets) stand supreme in stateliness.' I could cite numerous other appreciative comments, but it may be as well for us to examine them for ourselves.

Although Milton wrote but twenty-four sonnets, in the time before us, I think that it will be wise to consider selections merely from that number.

The verses prefixed to the Shakspere folio of 1630, only fourteen years after his death, beginning—

> What needs my Shakspere for his honoured bones,
> The labour of an age in pilëd stones?

sometimes classed among Milton's Sonnets, although sixteen lines long and written in couplets, being there-

fore not in the sonnet form at all, are yet in matter composed somewhat upon the mould of Shakspere's own, published twenty years before. Particularly the conceit embodied in the last two couplets suggests his manner,—according to our idea of to-day, a bad one.

> Then thou, our fancy of itself bereaving,
> Dost make us marble with too much conceiving,
> And so sepulchred in such pomp dost lie,
> That kings for such a tomb would wish to die.

To illustrate the similarity of manner, compare the following final couplet from one of Shakspere's Sonnets:

> And thou in this (my verse) shalt find thy monument,
> When tyrants' crests and tombs of brass are spent.
>
> (CVII., 13–14.)

It is interesting to mark that Milton ever wrote in this way, since nothing is more characteristic of his later style than careful avoidance of artificial poetical abstractions and forced conceits, which so abound in Shakspere's Sonnets, and that would be bearable only when, as in his use of them, they are packed full of meaning. Let any modern versifier shun their imitation, unless he would stand convicted by contrast with their force, of inevitable weakness and absurdity, all the more apparent from comparison with Shakspere forced upon the reader's notice by this very similarity.

In the sonnet to the Nightingale, usually called the First Sonnet, and written when Milton was twenty-two years of age, beginning,

O Nightingale! that on yon bloomy spray,
Warblest at eve when all the woods are still;
Thou with fresh hope the lover's heart doth fill,
While the jolly hours lead on propitious May—

Milton followed the accepted model of the time, and wrote in the vein of Spenser's *Amoretti*, and of the Italian sonnets, with which he was familiar.

To hear the nightingale before the cuckoo, was held to 'portend success in love,' the poet says.

Now timely sing, ere the rude bird of hate
Foretell my hopeless doom in some grove nigh;
As thou from year to year hast sung too late
For my relief, yet hadst no reason why.

Milton's invocation, it proved, was fruitless, as he remained unmarried for thirteen years; it had been well for him then had the liquid notes not reached his ears, which

First heard before the shallow cuckoo's bill,
Portend success in love.

In this sonnet to love's messenger we find none of the fire of *Lycidas*, written seven years later, where the concrete

Tangles of Neaera's hair

throw into shadowy poetical indistinctness and insig-

nificance the pale abstraction embodied in the last and best two lines of the sonnet —

> Whether the Muse or Love call thee his mate,
> Both them I serve and of their train am I.

Milton, blind, wifeless, and 'in disgrace with fortune and in men's eyes,' threw a thousand times the youthful fire into his praise of Eve when he came to write *Paradise Lost* more than thirty years later. We find what is lacking in this sonnet, somewhat of the volume and surge of power which we have come to regard as almost synonymous with the name of Milton, in the *Ode on Christ's Nativity*, written the year before, and while Milton was still a student at Cambridge, although in this as in the verses to Shakspere and in the First Sonnet, he had not escaped altogether from the hampering influences of academic tradition.

Together in the Academy of Fine Arts at Venice, hang Titian's Visitation of St. Elizabeth, which he began when he was fourteen years of age, and his Entombment of Christ, upon which he was at work in his ninety-ninth year: fitting monuments, marking the beginning and end of that long and crowded life, a life devoted to the service of Religion and of Art.

In like manner, it was fitting that Milton's first poetical production above the rank of college exercise, should be a *Hymn on the Morning of the Nativity of Christ.* —

> It was the Winter wilde,
> While the Heav'n-born Childe,
> All meanly wrapped in the rude manger lies;

— the prelude of that career to be closed in solemn grandeur by the simple elevation and dignity of the *Paradise Regained*, wherein is portrayed the victory of Christ over Satan and the declaring of his deity, — the story of man proved God, and

> Recovered Paradise to all mankind,
> By one man's firm obedience fully tried
> Through all temptation.

It is necessary that I should quote from Milton, yet I cannot hope in doing so to read you that which shall possess the charm of freshness and surprise; but after all has been said, they are not the highest virtues which verse may possess; to him who knows his Shakspere is a page of *Macbeth* less pleasant from acquaintance! Therefore, with no apology, I shall quote lines which are familiar to all, sure of the approval of him who knows them best.

For 'intricate fullness,' for profundity, for subtlety, for what may be called the metaphysics of poetry, there is no comparison between the difficulties of Shakspere's Sonnets and those of Milton; yet in one way it is a simpler task to treat of Shakspere's one hundred and fifty-four sonnets than of Milton's twenty-four; the former are sequent stanzas of a poem, or of perhaps three poems written in a similar vein, while each of Milton's is an independent poem in itself, and it is necessary to a great extent to treat them as separate poems. In only two instances are they continuous, and the second in both of these cases is written in quite a different vein from that in which the first is written.

The second of Milton's Sonnets was written on the occasion of his twenty-third birthday, 9 Dec., 1631.

> How soon hath time, the subtle thief of youth,
> Stolen on his wing my three and twentieth year.

This 'Petrarchian stanza,' as he characterizes it, was sent to a friend who had tried to persuade Milton to enter the church as a profession, and to do something, instead of spending so much time in preparation for he knew not what.

There can be no question but that Milton had the highest estimation of the calling of the poet; his office was that of the inspired seer rather than merely that of the singer. The prayer of his youth was that of his old age:

> (Do) thou celestial light
> Shine inward, and the mind through all her powers
> Irradiate, there plant eyes, all mist from thence
> Purge and disperse, that I may see and tell
> Of things invisible to mortal sight.
>
> (P. L., III., 51–5.)

And he felt equally confident of his own election to this high calling. Deliberately and before his twenty-third birthday, he had formed the determination to write a great Epic Poem, such as Homer, Dante, and Tasso had written, a purpose which he never relinquished; and he had in mind so early as 1640 the idea of *Paradise Lost.*

It seems an exaggeration of modesty to say, as he does in this Sonnet on his Twenty-third Birthday, that his

Late spring no bud or blossom shew'th,

for one who had, two years gone by, written the *Ode on Christ's Nativity*, wherein, if verse ever contained the echo of such, are heard celestial harmonies. On his ears fell the majesty and the sweetness of the mystic chants, whose ministrations before God's throne never cease, the worship of his Angels, sons of light whose

> Songs
> And choral symphonies, day without night,
> Circle his throne rejoicing.
>
> (P. L., V., 161-3.)

Reading this poem in properly attuned serenity of mind, the reader shares the transport of its creation. We feel that the music which the young poet invokes in fervent devotion to greet his God, has touched his own sense. His Muse has been permitted to join her voice unto the Angel Choir.

> Ring out, ye crystal spheres,
> Once bless our human ears,
> If ye have power to touch our senses so;
> And let your silver chime
> Move in melodious time;
> And let the bass of heaven's deep organ blow;
> And with your ninefold harmony,
> Make up full consort to the angelic symphony.

In the Sonnet we are considering, modesty is shown again, here rather a characteristic of the nation than of

the individual, when he speaks of his approach to manhood on his twenty-third birthday;—

> Perhaps my semblance might deceive the truth
> That I to manhood am arrived so near.

We on this side of the water at all events, should regard with suspicion the ingenuousness of a bachelor of arts who on his twenty-third birthday should express any doubts whatsoever that he were not a full-fledged man.

Milton was distinguished for, and prided himself upon, his manly beauty all his life. A Latin epigram written on him by the scholar Manso in Naples when he was thirty years old said of him,

> Mind, form, face, grace, and morals are perfect.
>
> (Masson's Translation.)

And years before, from the freshness of his complexion, and generally youthful appearance, combined with the propriety of his life, he was known at Cambridge as the 'lady of Christ's.'

There is certainly every appearance of real modesty when he says,

> And inward ripeness doth much less appear
> That some more timely happy spirits indu'th.

There can be no question but that the expression of the last six lines is in serious earnest. They have the

solemnity of a prayer, and express the feeling which guided his whole life.

> Yet be it less or more, or soon or slow,
> It shall be still in strictest measure even
> To that same lot however mean or high,
> Toward which time leads me and the will of Heaven.
> All is, if I have grace to use it so,
> As ever in my great task-master's eye.
>
> (SONNET II.)

The *Ode on the Nativity of Christ*, the verses *On Shakspere*, the *First* and *Second Sonnets* were written while Milton was still a student at Cambridge.

Fortunately his father's means made a fellowship unnecessary for him, and after leaving the University, he spent five years at Horton in study and in writing. These have been called the years of preparation, but they were, as well, most strikingly years of production, during which were composed the *Comus*, *Allegro*, *Penseroso*, and *Lycidas*.

Milton went abroad for travel in April, 1638, in his thirtieth year, and was absent from home, chiefly in Italy, a year and three months. Italian he had studied before he went abroad, and while in Italy he read with considerable thoroughness the literature of that country. At all events, he mastered the language sufficiently to use it as a medium of expression in the sonnets written while in Italy; but then he had an all-sufficient cause and stimulus; in his own words,

> This is the language in which love delights.
>
> (CANZONE, COWPER'S TRANSLATION.)

As in the twilight brown, on hillside bare,
Useth to go the little shepherd maid,
Watering some strange, fair plant, poorly displayed,
Not thriving in unwonted soil and air,
Far from its native springtime's genial care,
So on my ready tongue hath love assayed
Of a strange speech to wake new flower and blade.

(MACDONALD'S TRANSLATION.)

The few passages which I shall read from the Italian sonnets will be in translations; of such I had six to choose from, those namely of Langhorne, Cowper, Strutt, Masson, Pattison, and MacDonald; I dare say there are others. Naturally the best of them only approach the sonorous quality of Milton's own English, be it prose or verse.

Five Italian sonnets and a single canzone, like enough to the sonnet to be here treated of among them, written while in Italy, and inspired by a chaste passion for some woman of the city of Bologna, whose name we do not know, or possibly by the charm of Italian beauty in the abstract, although I do not believe it, were one result of his foreign tour. We have, apart from these sonnets, his own statement of the effect that this 'new type' of beauty produced upon him, accustomed all his life to the quite different charm and rosy freshness of English women, when he speaks of his 'soul tremulous with emotion' by reason of the loveliness which he beheld.

Yet think me not thus dazzled by the flow
Of *golden* locks, or *damask* cheek; more rare
The heart-felt beauties of my foreign fair,
A mien majestic, with dark brows that show
The tranquil lustre of a lofty mind.

(SONNET V., COWPER'S TRANSLATION.)

His song embraces not alone the praises of her person, but of her 'gentle spirit' (III.), 'graciously lofty,' (IV.)

> Spirit sweetly displaying itself,
> Of winning deeds never sparing,
> And of those gifts which are the arrows and the bow of love
> In that region where thy high virtue flowers.
>
> (SONNET III., PATTISON'S TRANSLATION.)

From what follows in the praise of her voice it has been conjectured that she was the then noted singer, Leonora, whom he heard at Rome, and to whom he wrote three Latin epigrams, *Ad Leonoram Romae canentem*, the first of which may be freely rendered—

> A wingëd angel from the ethereal ranks
> In popular belief guards each man's course.
> What wonder, Leonora, if to thee
> There fall a greater honour, for thy voice
> Proclaims God present in thee. Either God
> Or some bright spirit elect from heavenly choir
> Sings unseen through thy throat, creative sings,
> And teaches easily that mortal hearts
> Accustom may themselves to immortal sounds.
> But if God be all things, through all diffused,
> In thee he speaks, all else inhabits mute.*

*Compare with the first two lines of this the following from *Samson Agonistes*:

> *Chorus:* Go and the Holy One
> Of Israel * * * *
> Send thee the Angel of thy Birth, to stand
> Fast by thy side.
>
> (Ll., 1427-32.)

He mentions his lady's voice more than once.

> O when those lips in speech so matchless move
> Or frame the song that bids the forest bend,
> Be all aware who fear, alas! to love,
> And from the enchantress every sense defend;
> Reason can only save, ere yet desire
> With amorous flame the inmost bosom fire.
>
> (SONNET III., STRUTT'S TRANSLATION.)

And again 'from her lips' comes

> Song whose sweet control
> Down from her sphere the labouring moon might bow.
>
> (SONNET V., STRUTT'S TRANSLATION.)

The epigrams to Leonora and the praise of this lady's voice indicate another of Milton's tastes, and one of his strongest, his love of music. He had received instruction in music and the encouragement of his father, who was a graduate of Oxford, and was devoted to music, being himself a composer whose work was known and recognized as a value in his day. *Comus* had been written for a musical pageant, or mask, at the request of the composer, Harry Lawes, to whom Milton long after dedicated the sonnet,

> Harry, whose tuneful and well measured song
>
> (SONNET XIV.)

and in *Paradise Lost* he repeatedly dwells upon the delights and inspiration of Music: in fact the rhythm

and roll of verse in that poem are in a certain way themselves an achievement in music of no mean order. When he was writing *Paradise Lost*, Milton spent a portion of every day at the organ; it was his never failing inspiration; with its notes was his mind in uninterrupted accord. The full tones and ponderous sweep of harmonious sounds in *Paradise Lost* are just as much a triumph of art, as the choice of words to which that music is the accompaniment, or the majestic imagery that adorns it, or the grand and perfect design to which all its parts and qualities are subservient.

Besides sitting an hour at the organ every day, Milton often played upon the bass viol, and his wife sang to his accompaniment. Her voice he found sweet; it is not strange, however, that with his sensitive and accurate ear, hers seemed not altogether faultless. There may be degrees of excellence in melody; harmony to a correct ear can be only good or bad.

But to return to the Italian sonnets. There is a passage from Walter Savage Landor in which he says of Milton, 'It may be doubted whether the Creator ever created one altogether so great; taking into our view at once (as much indeed as can at once be taken into it) his manly virtues, his superhuman genius, his zeal for truth, for true piety, true freedom, his eloquence in displaying it, his contempt of personal power, his glory and exaltation in his country's.' Whether the estimate is an exaggerated one, we need not here examine; such, in Landor's deliberate opinion, this young scholar afterward proved himself, whom we now see writing love sonnets in Italian to an unknown beauty. Bearing in mind the Milton that

was to be, had ever woman laid at her feet more precious offering than this from him?

> To you, lady, I offer in deep devotion
> The lowly gift of my heart,—a heart which in many a trial
> I have found faithful, intrepid, loyal, discreet, good,
> A source of gracious thought.
> When the great world roars, and thunder bursts around,
> With itself this heart arms itself, as with solid adamant,
> Secure from violence or from envy,
> From all vulgar fears and hopes,
> Though devoted to genius, to high worth,
> To the sounding lyre, and the muse's service.
>
> (SONNET VII., PATTISON'S TRANSLATION.)

We cannot but feel glad that when Milton was brought into the presence of splendid Italian beauty he fell deeply in love. It is so pleasant to feel that he was a man as well as a Titan. Every biographical touch that makes him the more human, makes us love him the more; and consequently heightens our enjoyment of what he wrote. I think even that our regard for him increases a little when we learn that he was skilled with the broadsword, and prided himself on being more than a match for a larger man than himself; it was such a purely personal, harmless vanity.

Certainly those who have regarded him as unappreciative of woman could not be familiar with his English sonnets, four of which are addressed in noble appreciation to her, or still less with the graceful homage of the Italian Sonnets, the natural tribute of an idealist to perfection.

It is not of slight importance that while being one of

the three great epic poets of the world, Milton was also a man, and not at all a dull, dusty scholar, irresponsive to beauty, except of the shadowy sort, fit only to write about. Susceptibility to the charm of woman he had without doubt; Johnson or Macaulay (an evil association of names when the value of an opinion upon Milton or Dante is at issue) says that he possessed the warmth of temperament of an eastern lord of the harem. That may be, but he had himself in most excellent control. Burns without question had a similar temperament, but what impresses us above anything else in his character is the vigorous human sympathy that he had with every man or woman with whom he came in contact. It is not the first thing, by any means, that strikes us in Milton. He was responsive to grandeur of character, to beauty, to the charms of sex and womanliness, but I do not think his sympathies with mere human kind were very sensitive; in fact he was not only slightly, but supremely contemptuous of the crowd.

> The common rout
> That wandring loose about,
> Grow up and perish as the summer fly.
>
> (*Samson Agonistes*, 674–6.)

Or as he says elsewhere,

> A herd confus'd,
> A miscellaneous rabble, who extol
> Things vulgar.
>
> (P. R., III., 49.)

When we give due weight to a quality of Milton which the most competent critics and commentators

have not failed to observe, the identification of himself with whatever character he is delineating, be it Lucifer or Messiah; Samson, or Adam, or the 'affable Archangel';—a quality not injurious to the Epic although it would be fatal to the Drama,—and when we observe that it is from the mouth of Christ, tempted by Satan in the Wilderness, that the words of this latter quotation proceed, we can realize somewhat the contempt with which he regarded the mere 'breathers' of mankind, 'heads without name, no more remembered'.

> For what is glory but the blaze of fame,
> The people's praise, if always praise unmixt?
> And what the people but a herd confus'd,
> A miscellaneous rabble, who extol
> Things vulgar, and well weighed, scarce worth the praise?
> They praise and they admire they know not what,
> And know not whom, but as one leads the other;
> And what delight to be by such extoll'd,
> To live upon their tongues and be their talk,
> Of whom to be dispraised were no small praise?
>
> * * * * * * * * *
>
> Th' intelligent among them and the wise
> Are few, and glory scarce of few is raised.
>
> (P. R., III., 47-59.)

While he was Latin Secretary in London, he lived, as he wrote a correspondent, 'very close.' Wordsworth was quite fitted to sympathize with this quality, for outside of his shepherds and cottagers, whom he regarded as his discovery and in a way as belonging to him, he troubled himself very little about the outside world; what he says of shunning personal gossip

in his own case, indicates a similar aloofness of temperament;

> Nor can I not believe but that thereby
> Great gains are mine; for thus I live remote
> From evil speaking; rancor, never sought,
> Comes to me not, malignant truth or lie.

For humanity his love was boundless; the individual with his personalities and limitations often failed to interest him.

You remember what Wordsworth says of Milton in his, alas! too well-known sonnet,

> Thy soul was like a star, and dwelt apart;
> Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea;
> Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free.

This solitariness of character is a quality of Milton not to be disregarded. He was devoted to his friends but not desirous of extending their number, pleased rather with 'contemplation and profound dispute' than with the refreshment and inspiration derived by many, notably so in the case of Burns, from human contact and sympathy.

Milton never tired, we are told, of reading what he had written, in which again he was like Wordsworth, and preserved everything from his pen, even schoolboy exercises of no value to literature. In this, as Mark Pattison observed, he was the direct opposite of Shelley, who could not bear ever to see a thing after he had once finished it. And there may be a profound

significance underneath this simple difference. What came from Milton's pen was the product of a mind, before everything else full of health and vigor, and of that mind at its period of greatest health and vigor, and under perfect control. In a lesser degree this is also true of Burns and of Wordsworth. Shelley, while excelling perhaps in throbbing intensity of feeling the poetry of any one of them, produces in his reader a sense of unrest and pain. No mind could have been so sensitive to this as his own, and a thing once finished, his greatest delight was to rush into fresh intellectual occupation.

This 'tumultuous madness' was not at all a quality of Milton's mind; what came from it was the product of 'sober and sustained elevation of thought.' His 'unpremeditated verse,' as he characterizes it, the offspring of a mind dwelling

> On thoughts, that voluntary move
> Harmonious numbers,

was by no means always at his command, but when he was in the vein he wrote with perfect ease and composure of spirit; in fact, one quality that is stamped on the entire poetical work of his maturity as fully as any other, is calmness and repose.

Emerson's famous saying that 'character is higher than intellect,' was never more fully realized than in Milton; before him we stand in the presence of constant and commanding force of character. In reading Milton we feel that the man was greater than the poet. The very period of his life that we are considering,

demonstrates that, if it needs demonstration. He deliberately sacrificed the artistic side of his genius for twenty years to a life of humble usefulness. It was more than craving for artistic cultivation and expression that he sacrificed; he anticipated with perfect correctness the verdict of posterity in regard to his own powers,—he had no doubt whatever but that he was equal to the production of an Epic Poem such as England had never seen, and which should serve as a fountain of delight and inspiration for all time,—yet well aware of the exalted task which it was his privilege to perform,

> (His) heart
> The lowliest duties on herself did lay.

and he stayed his hand from the performance of that great work, that he might do exactly what our ancestors did, when they left their homes and a civilized country for the wilderness and freedom to worship God,—that he might, in short, with his whole strength, be a Puritan.

Only once in a year or two during this time did he write in verse at all, and then some special occasion aroused him to this form of expression. There can be no question but that what he did write freed from the constraints and limitations of prose, is of the utmost value to us, if we wish to judge of his ideals during this period.

It is impossible to do justice to the *Sonnets* without a familiarity with *Paradise Lost;* that *is* Milton, and everything else that he wrote must be considered in relation to it, and besides its own value, has an added

and peculiar interest attaching to it as the utterance of the same mind that evolved that epic in its full grandeur and symmetry. The Sonnets have this virtue, at all events, which belongs to no other of his poetical work, namely that they have been too often overlooked as fragmentary and unimportant.

Among the English sonnets only one was written before the temporary blight of an unfortunate marriage fell upon his life, and before he was hopelessly involved in pamphlet writing.

Milton returned from the continent in August, 1639, took rooms in London, and undertook the education of his two nephews, Edward and John Phillips, the sons of his only sister Anne. He had escaped one danger which beset a scholar at that time more than now, the acceptance of a University fellowship. The man who for civil and personal liberty was willing to sacrifice everything in the world, and who, under what appears to have been a mistaken sense of duty, actually did make the greatest sacrifice that poet could be called upon to offer, a sacrifice of nothing less than sustained poetic cultivation and expression during twenty years of his life, the exercise of that 'one talent which is death to hide,' was not the man to be bound by the restraints and limitations of a University fellowship. That would have given us a more learned scholar, but that scholar would never have written *Paradise Lost.* There can be no question but that at London and in the very whirl of revolutionary excitement, he felt the force of that revolution as he could not have done had he been instead a Cambridge scholar at his ease during all that time.

With knowledge of the event, we may regard his acceptance of the Latin Secretaryship as a mistake, so far as the value of his services to the Commonwealth was involved, because we can now see that his pamphlets, written in a spirit of contention altogether unworthy of the man, full of invective and of ill feeling, had no influence whatever beyond his own party, and were of trifling service to the elevation of the cause of liberty. Milton, however, was desperately in earnest when he wrote them, and was thinking much more of vigorously attacking his adversary than of anything else whatever; he was in the midst of fight, with passions aroused, and it is hardly fair for us to judge him in cold blood two centuries and a half later.

In Italy he had received marked attention as a distinguished stranger and poet, had experienced the hospitality of the Italian Academies, and of learned men in Florence, Rome, and Naples. These were the palmy days of his whole life; never again was he to be so much petted and admired. He had come home brimful of ambition, and we have in his own handwriting, written within a year or two after his return, and probably begun immediately after that event, a long list of possible subjects for an epic poem, mask, or drama, in which precedence was given to the subject of *Paradise Lost*,—a poem destined, however, not to be written for twenty years, and mentioned here only to show the bent of his mind at this time. After he had decided upon the epic form, (in 1642), we have his own statement that he did not consider himself as fitted yet, or as sufficiently experienced and mature, for its production.

It will be remembered that the tragedy of the Revolution was now in full progress. The royal army was defeated by the Scotch Presbyterians in August, 1640, and the Long Parliament met in November of that year.

No man in England was in fuller sympathy with the Puritan cause than Milton, or more alive to the abuses in the church than he. In *Lycidas*, written three years before, he had characterized the clergy in that scathing lament of Peter,

> How well could I have spar'd for thee, young swain—

ending in the prophetic lines,

> But that two-handed engine at the door,
> Stands ready to smite once, and smite no more.

So far as in him lay, Milton assisted at that retribution.

In 1641 he published his first pamphlet, (I.), *Of Reformation touching Church Discipline in England, and the Causes that hitherto have hindered it*, being in two books and attacking the Bishops and the Established Church. After this followed in quick succession, (II.), *Of Prelaticall Episcopacy*, being a reply to the most learned man in the English Church, Archbishop Usher, who had written a pamphlet called 'The Apostolical Institution of Episcopacy,' and, (III.), *The Reason of Church Government urged against Prelacy*. Then came, in 1642, (IV.), *Animadversions upon the Remonstrant's Defence against Smectymnuus*, which was an

attack upon Bishop Hall, and to say the least a heated and undignified attack. One more pamphlet he wrote in this debate, (V.), *The Apology for Smectymnuus.*

These are dreary reading to-day, although they contain passages of noble English, and the *Reason of Church Government* a distinct promise of some great work yet to be done.

Milton was in the heat of the fight, and when he wrote the sonnet upon the *Intended Assault on the City,* which is the next which we have to consider, and had no cause to accuse himself of being a Laodocean, of living in scholarly ease and security, amusing himself with the composition of verses, while others were actually bearing arms in defence of liberty. He was doing the best that in him lay, though with infinite temerity when he attacked a man of Usher's erudition in church literature; 'Being willing,' he says, 'to help the Puritans who were inferior to the Prelates in learning,' although 'not disposed to this manner of writing, wherein knowing myself inferior to myself, led by the genial powers of nature to another task, I have the use, as I may account it, but of my left hand.'

Such, then, were the circumstances of his life: he was living in London, teaching his nephews, and doing his best to help the cause of reformation with his pen, when the royal army advanced upon the city, and was met almost in its suburbs, on the 13 Nov., 1642, by the parliamentary forces under Essex.

Others have dwelt upon their chosen theme, Milton the Puritan, Milton the Republican, Milton the Inspired Poet and Seer; it may be permitted me to observe that if any single incident in his life revealed

Milton the Scholar, we see it here. It was the Scholar's instinct that made him in a time of excitement and danger, while others were bearing arms or were running about the streets for news, quietly to sit down, and seeking relief from the anxieties of the hour, to express himself with calmness and dignity in verse.

With the two armies confronting one another, forty thousand men in arms, within a few miles of his door, it took splendid composure of mind quietly to write these lines, his first expression in English verse since *Lycidas* was written, five years before.

> Captain, or Colonel, or Knight in arms,
> Whose chance on these defenceless doors may seize,
> If deed of honour did thee ever please,
> Guard them, and him within protect from harms.
> He can requite thee, for he knows the charms
> That call fame on such gentle acts as these,
> And he can spread thy name o'er land and seas
> Whatever clime the sun's bright circle warms.
> Lift not thy spear against the Muse's bower;
> The great Emathian conquerer bid spare
> The house of Pindarus, when temple and tower
> Went to the ground; and the repeated air
> Of sad Electra's poet had the power
> To save the Athenian walls from ruin bare.

How crisp, and strong, and resonant the verses roll!

I will not enter into the simple elucidation of the scholarly references of the sestet; what I wish to emphasize is that Milton's having written the sonnet at all is a sign of intellectual serenity superior to anything which the sonnet itself contains, although that is very fine. Ob-

serve, however, the perfectly matter of course way in which this young scholar,

> Young in years, but in sage counsel old,

ranks himself without vainglory, as without apology, with Pindar and with Euripides.

From the time of his marriage until 1658, the year in which the last sonnet was written, and when we know he was writing continuously upon *Paradise Lost*, Milton wrote about twenty pamphlets in English and Latin, half of them on church matters and several at the order of the Council, whose servant he became in 1649. Charles I. was beheaded in January of that year, and on 15 March, Milton took the oath of office as Latin Secretary to the Committee of Foreign Affairs, which was composed of six members of the Council of State. The position was not an important one. There was an English Secretary, whose services were deemed of twice the value of Milton's, and he was not intrusted with the original composition of dispatches except in a few instances. The most important thing that he did in this capacity was to write in Latin, among other pamphlets in the same tongue, his *Defence of the English People*, first and second, yet these have slight value for us to-day, and no one thinks of reading them.

Milton accepted the position from a mistaken sense of duty, but it is not impossible that together with the sense of duty, and acting as an unconscious motive, he felt a temptation,—peculiarly hard for a scholar to resist, for one who had seen but little of the world of affairs,

and for a man of his courageous temperament,—that of an active career and of contact and acquaintance with the leaders of Parliament and the State.

In the *Paradise Regained* one of the temptations offered by Satan is a knowledge of the world and of courts,

> Best school of best experience.

With his imagination fired by the success of the Parliamentary cause, could he help feeling the full enticement of the opportunity? He no doubt would desire at the end of his life to be able to say as Chaucer had said, looking back over his own, two centuries and more before that time,

> It doth mine herte boote
> That I have had my world as in my time.

Who can say that he chose not wisely? It may have taken participation in the intensest life of his time to fire his genius to the portrayal of the arch-rebel, Lucifer; just as blindness itself, although profound misfortune to the man, was probably an inspiration and gave pathetic sympathy with the subject when he wrote *Samson Agonistes;* but it is hard for us to say which seems the greater apparent misfortune, that he should be blind at forty-three, or that he should be forced to forego for twenty years, with the risk of never doing it, the accomplishment of that great work in literature which he knew himself fitted by genius to construct, and to the performance of which he felt his life to be dedicated.

Phillips tells us in his life of his uncle that one of Milton's friends at this time was the wife of a Captain Hobson, the Lady Margaret Ley (or Leigh), daughter of the first Earl of Marlborough, who had been Lord High Treasurer, and President of the Council under James and Charles I., and who had been an active supporter of the Parliamentary cause. Milton addressed a sonnet to her:

> Daughter to that good Earl, once President
> Of England's council and her treasury.

Then follows praise of her father, the sestet concluding—

> Though later born than to have known the days,
> Wherein your father flourished, yet by you,
> Madam, methinks I see him living yet;
> So well your words his noble virtues praise,
> That all both judge you to relate them true,
> And to possess them, honoured Margaret.

There is a quiet dignity about this sonnet that is charming. Structurally, it is correct in one detail of which the most of Milton's sonnets are regardless, namely, in the observance of the pause between the octave and sestet. It may be said that the last line comes as near the epigrammatic ending without actually erring, as may with safety be approached.

Shakspere's not unusual practice was to conclude with an epigram, the form which he employed, of four quatrains and a couplet favouring this practice. But as has been said before, the English Sonnet was in its

infancy in his day. Countless experiments have taught us since that what should be aimed at in a sonnet is the expression of a single thought or emotion, the formation of a compact, well-rounded, organic whole, and not a brilliant finish which may detract at all from the force and relative importance of any preceding part.

The three sonnets addressed to Fairfax, Cromwell, and Vane, are of peculiar interest. That *On the Lord General Fairfax at the Siege of Colchester*,—

> Fairfax, whose name in arms through Europe rings,

is an expression of delight and of congratulation at the success of the Independent army, rather than a personal address to the general, or eulogy of the man; the same may be said of the sonnet addressed to Cromwell. It is the occasion that Milton has in mind rather than the person, and the closing verses show that, Milton-like, he was not at all disposed to rest satisfied with victory over the Royalists, while Parliament acted from any motives other than the most patriotic and the most pure.

> O yet a nobler task awaits thy hand
> (For what can war but endless war still breed?)
> Till truth and right from violence be freed,
> And public faith cleared from the shameful brand
> Of public fraud. In vain doth valour bleed,
> While avarice and rapine share the land.

The Siege of Colchester was in July and August, 1648; Charles was beheaded in the following January.

At this time Milton was living quietly in London, perhaps teaching his nephews, his time fully occupied; at all events we know that he was busy in the compilation of a *Latin Dictionary*, in the writing of a *History of England* from the most remote times, in the formation of a *Digest of Christian Doctrine* from the Bible, and in the metrical translation of nine *Psalms* from the Hebrew.

His next sonnet, addressed to Cromwell, was not written for four years. This was after he had become Latin Secretary, and when he had been totally blind for little more than a month, on account of which he was not for the time being in attendance at the Council meetings. He took this way of urging Cromwell, who was a member of the Committee before whom the matter came, to oppose a ministry supported by tithes, to the full extent of his influence and power; Cromwell, however, did not regard the matter in the same light as did Milton.

During the time which had elapsed since the sonnet to Fairfax, he had written the then important pamphlet on *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, which was of influence in fixing the choice of the Council upon him for Latin Secretary; after the appointment he had been fully occupied with the new duties of his office and in writing pamphlets for the Council.

One naturally turns to the sonnet on Cromwell for Milton's estimate of the other's greatness; for that we must look elsewhere. Although in matters of scholarship Cromwell was a barbarian, and there could be no sympathy between him and Milton in such matters, yet in what concerned religion and the Commonwealth of

England, Milton was in close sympathy with him. There is no evidence to show, however, that the two men were ever friends or even acquaintances. Officially, Milton held a humble position under the Commonwealth; Hume's quotation from Whitlocke, Lord Keeper of the Seals, is familiar, in which he speaks of 'one Milton, as he calls him, a blind man, who was employed in translating a treaty with Sweden into Latin;'* Milton was yet unknown. This sonnet to Cromwell, as the title in the original manuscript copy indicates, was written rather invoking aid than in a spirit of adulation. Its title reads—*To the Lord General Cromwell, May 1652, on the Proposals of Certain Ministers at the Committee for Propagation of the Gospel.* Its purpose was to defeat the Presbyterians who were desirous of providing a maintenance by tithes for their church. Milton had this, as well as other bonds, in common with Fox—to the pure spirituality of whose nature his own lofty and ideal poetic instincts, blended with sound and unswerving character, bore close resemblance—that he regarded with horror a ministry supported by tithes, deeming spiritual matters separate from, and altogether above matters of state.

Cromwell, our chief of men, who through a cloud
Not of war only, but detractions rude,
Guided by faith and matchless fortitude,
To peace and truth thy glorious way hast ploughed,
And on the neck of crowned fortune proud
Hast reared God's trophies, and his work pursued,
While Darwen stream, with blood of Scots imbrued,

* Hume, ch. LXIII.

And Dunbar field, resound thy praises loud,
And Worcester's laureate wreath; yet much remains
To conquer still; peace hath her victories
No less renowned than war; new foes arise
Threatening to bind our souls with secular chains.
Help us to save free conscience from the paw
Of hireling wolves, whose gospel is their maw. *

It is interesting to read, in connection with the sonnet to Cromwell, Milton's panegyric of him in the *Defensio Secunda*, published two years later. Fortunately we have a translation full of dignity by a scholar, appreciative of elegant Latin, if not appreciative and approving of Milton, by Dr. Johnson himself. 'A translation,' he tells us, 'may show its servility; but its elegance is less attainable.' * * * 'Cæsar, when he assumed the perpetual dictatorship, had not more servile or more elegant flattery.'

* Compare with the ending of this sonnet the lines from *Lycidas*,

The hungry sheep look up and are not fed,
But swoln with wind, and the rank mist they draw,
Rot inwardly, and foul contagion spread:
Besides what the grim wolf with privy paw
Daily devours apace, and nothing said.
(Ll., 125–129.)

and the following from *Paradise Lost:*

Wolves shall succeed for teachers, grievous wolves,
Who all the sacred mysteries of Heaven
To their own vile advantages shall turn
Of lucre and ambition, and the truth
With superstitions and traditions taint.
(Ll., 508–512.)

"'"We were left," says Milton, "to ourselves; the whole national interest fell into your hands, and subsists only in your abilities. To your virtue, overpowering and resistless, every man gives way, except some who, without equal qualifications, aspire to equal honours, who envy the distinctions of merit greater than their own, or who have yet to learn, that in the coalition of human society nothing is more pleasing to God, or more agreeable to reason, than that the highest mind should have the sovereign power. Such, sir, are you by general confession; such are the things achieved by you, the greatest and most glorious of our countrymen, the director of our public councils, the leader of unconquered armies, the father of your country; for by that title does every good man hail you with sincere and voluntary praise."'

The Sonnet to Vane forms the fourth of those, which by reason of their republican tone could not be published after the Restoration with Milton's other poems, the year before his death, 1673, and were not in fact published in the form in which they were written until a century after their composition, 1752. Milton's nephew, Phillips, issued them in a safe but garbled edition in 1694.

Sir Henry Vane,

> Vane, young in years, but in sage councils old,

to whom this was addressed was at the time a member of the Council of State.

It seems strange to speak of one of Milton's sonnets as addressed to an American, yet we are not overstep-

ping the truth in saying that Vane had been an American if he was not at this time. He came here with the younger Winthrop on his second visit in 1635,—and it was alone owing to an unfortunate disagreement on a doctrinal point of religion that he did not remain.

Winthrop says '(He) forsook the honours and preferments of the court, to enjoy the ordinances of Christ in their purity here.'

His father, at the time the son came here, was a Privy Councillor and one of the Secretaries of State, altogether one of the two or three most important men in England at that time. Before the younger Vane, then twenty-three years of age, had been here nine months, the General Court elected him Governor of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, as she called herself, already aspiring to be a Republic. Unfortunately, at a very critical period in the History of the Massachusetts Colony, when the permanence of her charter was threatened by Charles, who had granted it, on which charter were based all her hopes of Independence, Vane entangled himself in the controversy then active on Salvation by faith or works, and championed the cause of the famous Mrs. Ann Hutchinson. He contrived to stir up very heated opposition on this account, and left the colony in disgust after his failure to be reëlected and after he had been here less than two years. He became Minister for Foreign Affairs under Cromwell, and ten years after this sonnet was written was beheaded by Charles II., (1662).

Lord Clarendon's estimate of Vane is that he was a fanatic; like others of the time, he was an enthusiast in religion. What is of chief interest to us, is that

to him Milton awarded praise which he gave to no other man in his Sonnets.

> Vane, young in years, but in sage council old,
> Than whom a better Senator ne'er held
> The helm of Rome, when gowns not arms repelled
> The fierce Epirot and the African bold.
>
> * * *
>
> On thy firm hand religion leans
> In peace, and reckons thee her eldest son.

When Milton wrote his famous Sonnet *On the Late Massacre in Piedmont*, it is not impossible that his mind was dwelling again on the theme of *Paradise Lost*. Three years later his nephew tells us that he was continuously at work upon it; a fragment of ten lines in the fourth book had been written immediately after his return from Italy in 1640, as the opening lines of his then contemplated tragedy treating of the same theme.

I do not mean to say that the same feeling pervades this sonnet which is the life and atmosphere of *Paradise Lost*. That is primarily and above all else a work of the imagination, and possesses the richness and grandeur which a World's Epic should possess; the sonnet is the expression of powerful feeling, clothed in simple, homely words. What I do mean to say is that this sonnet is the product of Milton's genius at the very height of its powers, and is in every way worthy of the mind that so soon was to evolve in its intricate simplicity, in its grand and unconfused proportions, the poem of *Paradise Lost*.

The event which roused Milton to this 'trumpet blast' of wrath, to the solemn invoking of God's anger against the offenders, was the massacre of three hundred innocent men, women, and children of the people known as Vaudois, or Waldenses, living well up in the Alpine Valleys of Piedmont in Italy. The Vaudois were poor peasants, a few thousand in number, who from time immemorial had, in spite of persecution, refused to comply with the demands of the Romish church. They were 'Protestants' long before the Reformation, and as such were peculiarly dear to all Protestant countries when the atrocious crime of which they were now the victims was committed. This was the people

> Who kept (God's) truth so pure of old,
> When all our fathers worshipped stocks and stones.

Their valleys were a part of the possessions of the Duke of Savoy, and this humble folk had been somewhat spared for a few generations from great persecution. The present Duke, on the attainment of his majority, determined to bring them into the church. Catholic Friars were sent among them, one of whom was killed; thereupon the edict went forth from the Court of Turin that the entire population of nine of their communes should within three days, unless they pledged themselves to enter the Romish church within twenty days thereafter, remove to five of their communes situated higher up in the Alps. Remonstrance to the Court was in vain, and towards the end of April, still a time of snow in the Alps, the threat was put in

execution. A body of troops sufficient for the purpose was sent among them, and for eight days everything that hatred and resistance could inspire, or brutal cruelty and lust suggest, was wreaked on these poor villagers. Their only safety was in flight higher up the mountains, where without sufficient shelter or sustenance, great hardship was suffered. A circular letter was addressed to the Protestant Powers of Europe, and the news of the massacre reached England a month later. None felt the calamity more than Cromwell, who said that it came as 'near his heart as if his own nearest and dearest had been concerned.'

A day of humiliation was appointed, and a collection taken for their relief, amounting to more than six hundred thousand dollars of our money to-day, thirty-five thousand of which Cromwell gave from his own purse. The matter became that of chief importance in the Council, and Milton drew up no less than eleven letters in Latin to the Duke of Savoy, the King of France, the Swiss Cantons, to the King of Sweden, and others, demanding redress and invoking aid.

There was, as I have said, an English Secretary to the Council of State, whose duty it was to draw up foreign dispatches which the Latin Secretary rendered into Latin. But the dispatches in this case, one of the few instances where it so happened, were drawn up by the Latin Secretary himself, so his mind was full of the subject, and that Secretary being Milton, he naturally sought expression for profound feeling in verse. The result was that he then wrote what critics best qualified to judge have pronounced the most magnificent sonnet in the English language. Others have written sonnets

full of fine poetic feeling; among the sonnets of Shakspere, Keats, Wordsworth, Mrs. Browning, and Rosetti, may be found those just as full of intense emotion of a different sort, and possessing charms of delicacy which this makes no attempt to attain; but this before every sonnet in the Language takes precedence for force and virility.

> Avenge, O Lord, thy slaughtered saints, whose bones
> Lie scattered on the Alpine mountains cold;
> Even them, who kept thy truth so pure of old,
> When all our fathers worshipped stocks and stones,
> Forget not: in thy book record their groans,
> Who were thy sheep, and in their ancient fold
> Slain by the bloody Piemontese, that rolled
> Mother with infant down the rocks; their moans
> The vales redoubled to the hills and they
> To heaven. Their martyred blood and ashes sow
> O'er all the Italian fields, where still doth sway
> The triple tyrant; that from these may grow
> A hundred-fold, who, having learnt thy way,
> Early may fly the Babylonian woe.

The excellence of this sonnet lies in something else than in poetical idea or in grandeur of diction. If Wordsworth's definition of poetry be a correct one, this sonnet exactly fulfils its requirements,—it is a 'spontaneous outburst of powerful emotion.' To repeat his words in regard to the Sonnet in general, in writing which he must have had this one in mind,

> In (Milton's) hand
> The thing became a trumpet, whence he blew
> Soul-animating strains—alas, too few!

Whether the sonorous ring of its verse is best expressed in likening it to the trumpet blast, or whether it approach not nearer to the grand organ roll, whose music is heard, sometimes in faint undertone, again in overpowering volume, surging through the mighty verse of *Paradise Lost*, — of this there can be no question, that in its limited compass echo 'the solemn and divine harmonies of music.'

The sonnets to Cromwell, Vane, and on the Massacre in Piedmont were all written after Milton's blindness; that on his Blindness in the same year as the last of these. It is the meditation of a wise man schooling himself to adversity. Not a note of repining in the presence of almost overwhelming misfortune do we hear, such as the moan echoing in the *Agonistes*,

> O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon,
> Irrevocably dark, total Eclipse
> Without all hope of day!

only the lament here of a strong man that his voice of song has not been raised in the service of God, since as Milton believed God is best served by the faithful exercise of those talents which he has given, to one five, to another two, to another one; to every man according to his several ability.

> When I consider how my light is spent,
> Ere half my days in this dark world and wide,
> And that one talent which is death to hide
> Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent
> To serve therewith my Maker, and present

My true account, lest He returning chide,—
'Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?'
I fondly ask. But patience to prevent
That murmur, soon replies, 'God doth not need
'Either man's work or his own gifts. Who best
'Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state
'Is kingly; thousands at his bidding speed,
'And post o'er land and ocean without rest;
'They also serve who only stand and wait.'

All of Milton's powers were unconsciously gathering and solidifying and ordering themselves for the supreme effort of *Paradise Lost.*

They also serve who only stand and wait,

says the man whose 'unpremeditated verse,'—

Unmeditated, such prompt eloquence
Flowed from (his) lips, in Prose or Numerous Verse,
More tuneable than needed Lute or Harp
To add more sweetness.

(P. L., V. 149–152.)

whose verse in two or three years was to take the form of *Paradise Lost;* whose hand was to strike with ease and with firmness those heroic chords, as only two, or three, or four men, in the whole history of the world, before his time and since have struck, in sympathy with which every man that reads, feels himself dignified, and ennobled, and taught infinite lessons of courage and of proud humility.

Similar to the sonnet which we have been consider-

ing, and also on the theme of his blindness, is the second of those addressed to Cyriac Skinner, who was of the little band of young men one of whom daily read and walked with him.

> Cyriac, this three years' day these eyes, though clear,
> To outward view, of blemish or of spot,
> Bereft of light, their seeing have forgot;
> Nor to their idle orbs doth sight appear
> Of sun, or moon, or star, throughout the year,
> Or man, or woman.

Like enough to be a continuation are the lines of the third book of *Paradise Lost.*

> Thus with the year
> Seasons return, but not to me returns
> Day, or the sweet approach of Even or Morn,
> Or sight of vernal bloom or Summer's Rose,
> Or flocks, or herds, or human face divine.

The Sonnet continues Milton-like,—in nothing that he wrote do we see the fibre of his character more plainly shown than here:

> Yet I argue not
> Against Heaven's hand or will, nor bate a jot
> Of heart or hope, but still bear up and steer
> Right onward.

The Restoration of Charles II. to the English throne was to take place in less than five years. That

Restoration was to Milton the shattering of his dearest hopes. The work for which in his youth he had so carefully trained himself, unperformed, himself in hopeless blindness, in poverty, in disgrace, and in old age, his second wife dead, after fifteen months of happy married life, the more pleasing in contrast with his first marriage, and obliged to hide, such a life might to another have seemed a wretched failure. Yet the most sympathetic admirer of Milton and the most unreserved Republican may be pardoned if he rejoice in the service which Charles II. unwittingly rendered to the cause of civilization, by setting free the man John Milton from unprofitable tasks, to write *Paradise Lost*, even although the causes which produced that liberation were apparently misfortunes to the man, and postponed for a while Democracy in England.

The other sonnet addressed to Cyriac Skinner and the one to Lawrence we could ill spare in any treatment, however special, of his verse written during this period, which should present us with a well-rounded character, or give us a correct idea of the man.

The touches of humour in *Paradise Lost* are forbidding. More than once do the austerities of the Hebrew Jehovah yield place to the equally repellant and ungodlike derision of a Jove, looking at man's failure to laugh at it—as where Raphael in the Eighth Book tells Adam that man's solution of the celestial motions will excite God's mirth; or where in the last book, the confusion of tongues provoked God to merriment; or where in the Fifth Book he holds in contempt the revolt of Lucifer and the Sons of Morn, although they were his created Angels and a third part of the hosts

of Heaven. Only severe Puritanism and Calvinistic theology could so harden a poet as to make him imagine the pleasure of the Creator contemplating the infirmities of his creature.

But in these sonnets which we now approach, we see the amiable side of Milton, as nowhere else more fully.

> Lawrence, of virtuous father virtuous son,
> Now that the fields are dark, and ways are mire,
> Where shall we sometimes meet, and by the fire
> Help waste a sullen day, what may be won
> From the hard season gaining? Time will run
> On smoother, till Favonius reinspire
> The frozen earth, and clothe in fresh attire
> The lily and the rose that neither sowed nor spun.
> What neat repast shall feast us, light and choice,
> Of Attic taste, with wine, whence we may rise
> To hear the lute well touched, or artful voice
> Warble immortal notes and Tuscan air?
> He who of these delights can judge, and spare
> To interpose them oft, is not unwise.

These last two lines contain one of the most delightful ambiguities to be found in literature; one capable of quite opposite meanings. Milton does not mean that the man is wise who will spare time to interpose these good things frequently; what he wished to enforce was a sparing indulgence in repasts however 'neat' with wine; as for the beneficial services of music, he believed in them without reserve, as elevating, and full of strength and repose. Compare the ending of this sonnet, as presenting a moral lesson unexpectedly

following the graceful musings of the poèt, with that of one of the Italian love sonnets.

> Oh, were my sluggish heart and hard bosom,
> As good a soil to him who plants from Heaven.
>
> (IV., PATTISON'S TRANSLATION.)

In a similar vein to this and equally charming, coming from the blind scholar and poet to his young friend, is the first of the two to Cyriac Skinner.

> To-day deep thoughts resolve with me to drench
> In mirth that, after, no repenting draws;
> Let Euclid rest, and Archimedes pause,
> And what the Swede intends, and what the French.
> To measure life learn thou betimes, and know
> Towards solid good what leads the nearest way;
> For other things mild Heaven a time ordains,
> And disapproves that care, though wise in show,
> That with superfluous burden loads the day,
> And, when God sends a cheerful hour, refrains.

Thus our study of Milton's sonnets has come to his last one, and I hope the time so spent has not been tedious.

Before we consider his last touching utterance in this form, it may be well to regard for a moment the *Sonnets* as a whole, and see, if we may, wherein it has been worth our while to study them for an hour.

Milton's Sonnets reflect the period of his life in which they were written. They are the simple, forcible utterance of a great poet, who has sacrificed his passion for Poetry to a stronger passion for Duty. The *Sonnets*,

in many ways, show the limitations of the poet's life. They are not written in an imaginative vein; while he was endowed with the most powerfully organic imagination in English verse, his sonnets are of Doric severity. It is remarkable that the fault of ornateness, which this form of verse had derived in a perfectly legitimate manner from its Italian model, but which was not suited to the genius of our language, should have been corrected by the one English poet with the most splendid and exuberant imaginative powers. His is the credit of having penetrated to the life and nature of the Sonnet and recognized its exact scope and place in our language. For twenty years he chose no other form for expression in verse, and his success was such in this as to warrant Wordsworth's praise, in calling them 'soul animating strains.'

It would not be surprising if poetical work whose merit so experienced a critic as Dr. Johnson failed altogether to detect, and which others since have pronounced not very remarkable, should fail to make a telling impression on cursory acquaintance; but when we have the testimony of Wordsworth, calling them 'soul animating strains,' it behooves us before hastily pronouncing judgment on their worth, to penetrate to the secret of their power if we are able to do so.

It is well known that the same powers that produced it, are required to form a judgment of any artistic creation, — the same, differing only in degree, — the closer the approach to equal powers, the keener the delight to be derived in appreciation.

No one questions the force and truth of his statement when a preacher tells us that only those whose

life approaches somewhat in spirituality to that of Christ can realize and appreciate the sublimity and divineness of his character; and that those whose lives most nearly approach to the divine perfection of their master, following his bidding to be perfect even as God is perfect, will most fully appreciate the unattainable perfection of their exemplar.

In an exactly similar manner, to compare small things with great, or great things with those far greater, only those whose intellectual powers and cultivation most nearly approach those of the poet can adequately judge of his excellence.

There is in the Sonnets of Milton a power of art displayed which it took the kindred art of Wordsworth fully to detect and appreciate. 'My admiration of some of the Sonnets of Milton first tempted me to write in that form,' he tells us. *(Advertisement to Collected Sonnets.)* 'In the cottage of Town-end, one afternoon in 1801, my sister read to me the Sonnets of Milton. I had long been well acquainted with them, but I was particularly struck on that occasion with the dignified simplicity and majestic harmony that runs through most of them — in character so totally different from the Italian, and still more so from Shakspere's fine Sonnets. I took fire, if I may be allowed to say so, and produced three Sonnets the same afternoon, the first I ever wrote, except an irregular one at school.' (Notes by the author to the complete edition of Wordsworth's Poems.)

Wordsworth's Sonnets were written by a poet at his leisure and carefully protected from distraction.

I think we shall find the key to the working out and

to the fertility of Wordsworth's genius in one of his Sonnets and in a letter, the two written more than a quarter of a Century apart;—the letter long before success crowned him, the sonnet after the vast bulk of his poetry on which his fame depends was written.

Most sweet it is with unuplifted eyes
To pace the ground, if path there be or none,
While a fair region round the traveller lies
Which he forbears again to look upon;
Pleased rather with some soft ideal scene,
The work of fancy, or some happy tone
Of meditation, slipping in between
The beauty coming and the beauty gone.
If Thought and Love desert us, from that day
Let us break off all commerce with the Muse.
With Thought and Love companions of our way,
Whate'er the senses take or may refuse,
The mind's internal heaven shall shed her dews
Of inspiration in the humblest lay.

(Composed in 1833.)

Wordsworth had meditated of the deepest issues of life, and had thrown his whole soul into what he had said. People would not, at first, accept such sentiment, their interests being engrossed in the struggle for preferment, and in all sorts of ambitions:

Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers.

What have the things which I have written, he writes his correspondent, 'to do (to say it all at once) with a

life without love? In such a life there can be no thought; for we have no thought (save thoughts of pain), but as far as we have love and admiration.' (Letter to Lady Beaumont, 1807.)

In Love and Thought was his life rounded; one was possible to him only as the other was lavished upon him, and those who are familiar with his life know that he was surrounded, during the twenty years of his inspired poetic utterance, with all the care which the affection of two most remarkably bright and devoted women, his wife and his sister, could suggest. Forced to live with rigid economy, yet with everything done for him that love could prompt, removed from the distractions of society and the world, nourishing a life of sedate reflection and meditative calm and continence, it is no wonder that his mind attained that healthfulness, whose product is the splendid sanity of his verse, the joy and refreshment and health of which could make conquest even of the scientifically derived dissatisfaction and overwhelming sense of futility and dejection which beset John Stuart Mill at one time, as he tells us in his *Autobiography*, and which much oftener prevails in the moods of less elaborately and mechanically sustained faculties.

Solitude and fostering care were absolutely necessary to the performance of what he did;—Milton produced the work that we are considering amid the bustle and distractions of public office, and occupied with fighting the wordy battles of his party. It is no wonder that such work partakes of limitations, yet 'Milton's (Sonnets) stand supreme in stateliness, (as) Wordsworth's in depth and delicacy,' says Francis Tur-

ner Palgrave, now professor of poetry at Oxford, and a critic whose opinion is of the very highest value. What qualities unite in them to produce their stateliness?

We should deceive ourselves if we selected the *Sonnets* as part of Milton's most imaginative poetry, as of the same order of poetry as *Lycidas*, the *Penseroso*, or *Paradise Lost;* these would approach, or fulfil, the function of Poetry as Wordsworth has defined it, as being the end toward which he himself aspired as a poet; 'To console the afflicted; to add sunshine to daylight by making the happy happier; to teach the young and the gracious of every age to see, to think, and to feel.' (Letter to Lady Beaumont.)

It is not for clairvoyant *sight*, a strength of vision that penetrates to the inmost life of things, and which we find in Wordsworth, that these sonnets are remarkable; nor does their value consist in profound *thought*. They are not to be compared with Shakspere's in this regard, which are packed full of meaning, a more recondite significance often underlying that of the surface. The best of these sonnets reveal strength of *feeling;* therein lies their charm, and in the simplicity of the means with which Milton has produced in us the emotions which had possession of his own breast.

This strength of feeling is something differing from what is best described as poetic sensibility, which Shelley and Keats had in abundance, and which Wordsworth had, combined with strength of character, and an intense desire to elevate the feelings and thoughts and ideals of mankind. The

Still, sad music of humanity

was an undertone that with him even poetic ecstasy never forgot.

By 'poetic sensibility' I mean a delicate and developed power of detecting beautiful surroundings, which less refined perceptions would overlook, combined with a power of transmuting and sublimating through the magic of Fancy and Imagination, these simple impressions of beauty in the midst of which we live into

Something new and strange,

in short, into poetry.

There is little of this play and playfulness of Fancy in the *Sonnets;* that is found in *L'Allegro* and in *Il Penseroso,*—and something higher than Fancy, sublime Imagination, lifts us into an unreal and purifying atmosphere when we read *Paradise Lost,* or *Regained,* or the *Agonistes.*

I think that in many moods of the mind, particularly in dejection or disappointment, Wordsworth will recall one to a feeling of

Joy in widest commonalty spread,

as no other poet can; Milton's function is not that. *Paradise Lost,* or the *Agonistes,* or *Lycidas,* or the *Avenge, O Lord!* should be read at the height of one's faculties; in one's strength their strength should be tested.

When Milton wrote the sonnet in memory of his dearly beloved wife, who was but lately dead, we know from his nephew's narrative that he was at work upon

Paradise Lost; living that intense, inner, ideal life, in the presence of Archangels and Seraphim, surrounded by the realities and splendours of Heaven, or walking in Paradise with our first parents, feeling with them as none ever felt more vividly the favour of God and the majesty of innocence,—man's happiest life, 'simplicity and spotless innocence':

> Mine eyes he closed, but open left the cell
> Of Fancy my internal sight.
>
> (P. L., VIII., 460–1.)

To this 'internal sight' his wife appeared in vision:

> Methought I saw my late espoused saint
> Brought to me, like Alcestis, from the grave.

Her face he had never seen, and even here that privilege was denied him; she came

> Vested all in white, pure as her mind.
> Her face was veiled; yet to my fancied sight
> Love, sweetness, goodness, in her person shined
> So clear, as in no face with more delight.
> But O, as to embrace me she inclined
> I waked, she fled, and day brought back my night.

All must feel the pathos of the closing verse.

I beg for indulgence in quoting the two best-known lines in *Paradise Lost;* but I wish to call attention to the simple dignity of the lines of the sonnet, which form the ending of his utterance of this period, in com-

parison with the simplicity and force which characterize the ending of that poem, of the *Paradise Regained*, and of the *Agonistes*.

You remember that Michael was sent to lead from Paradise our first parents—

> They hand in hand with wandering steps and slow,
> Through Eden took their solitary way.

In the *Paradise Regained*, after the angelic escort had borne Christ in safety from the topmost pinnacle of the temple, and ministered to his refreshment with celestial food,

> He unobserved
> Home to his Mother's house private returned.

And in the *Agonistes*, the closing verses form a supremely fitting ending for his last expression in verse.

> His servants he * * *
> With peace and consolation hath dismist,
> And calm of mind, all passion spent.

In like manner the *Sonnets* which are the brief record of Milton's poetical life for twenty years, have their impressive close. The realities of worldly happiness for him were at an end. Monarchy restored; puritanism defeated; himself wandering in the dark mazes of blindness; his wife who had brought him consolation and joy, dead; well might he say,

Though fall'n on evil days,
On evil days though fall'n, and evil tongues;
In darkness and with dangers compassed round,
And solitude.

(P. L., VII., 25-28.)

Nor am I in the list of them that hope;
Hopeless are all my evils.'

(*Sam. Agon.*, 648–9.)

The life in vision alone, now was a reality. To him, made fit by suffering, by striving, and by the Grace of God, was granted to see the Glories of Heaven, and to taste of its beatitudes. In a dream the compassionate tenderness of God had vouchsafed for a moment again the presence of his wife, but we hear his moan of resignation:

I waked,—she fled, and day brought back my night.

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